Scottish Ballot is Not Stoking Nationalism in Northern Ireland

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April 11 2014, 1.14am EDT

Scottish ballot is not stoking nationalism in Northern Ireland

A U T H O R

Christine Bell
Professor of Constitutional Law at University of Edinburgh

D I S C L O S U R E S T A T E M E N T

Christine Bell does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

Irish situation is delicate enough without talk of referendums anywhere near Stormont. Joel Riley, CC BY-SA

Northern Ireland's oldest joke is that a man is asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" to which he replies, "Actually I'm Jewish".

His questioner responds: "Yes but are you a Protestant or a Catholic Jew?"

In the joke is the recognisable truth that in Northern Ireland all comparative debates are engaged with not just on their own terms, but on their significance for the troubles.

This has been true of the approach to Scottish independence. When the referendum was launched, Ulster Unionist politician **Lord**

Empey indicated that a referendum could destabilise Northern Ireland.

Martin McGuiness, the deputy first minister (Sinn Féin), **quickly responded** that Northern Ireland should stay out of Scotland's right to decide its own future. Neither response was "neutral" – Empey was affirming the Union and McGuiness a right to unilateral self-determination.

Later **Gerry Adams indicated**, perhaps more for his Southern Irish audience (where he now stands for election), that the Scottish referendum increased the impetus for a referendum in Northern Ireland.

Interestingly, there has been no unionist return to statements from that side in the 1970s which indicated that in the event of the break-up of the two key kingdoms of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland might decide which one it wanted to stay in union with.

Despite this initial discussion, Northern Ireland has enjoyed a level of protection from contagion as referendum fever has progressed in Scotland. The **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement** and **Northern Ireland Act 1998** make clear provision for a referendum, unlike the **Scotland Act 1998**. This clarity over when and how a referendum can be called has set limits which have curbed game playing.

Yet at a more existential level, the debate matters greatly. Exactly how it matters is complicated, because how to read Scotland's implications for Northern Ireland cuts different ways culturally and politically.

The rise of the Ulster-Scots

Culturally the Northern Irish Protestants and unionists revere their Scottish ancestry and connections and look to Scotland as their kin. Affirming their Ulster-Scots identity has become more politically significant to the community since the 1998 Agreement.

Their culture and language, which is little different to that of Scots, has been re-awakened partly as an attempt to find a positive identity rather than being "not Irish" or "merely British".

More problematically, affirming their culture has led unionist communities to compete for funding with nationalists, where the culture has traditionally been strong and there has been a more established revival of the Irish language.

Politically there could even be a possible sneaking unionist regard for the straightforward approach and political positions of the SNP, perhaps rooted in the now almost-forgotten loyalist yearning for an independent Northern Ireland.

One can imagine that Alex Salmond's ability to just speak for Scotland as its first minister and propose unilateral action in the name of his majority vote might appear attractive to someone like Peter Robinson.

The unionist Northern Irish premier can neither speak as unilateral first minister nor claim to represent the country on his own, yet he would share Salmond's basic distrust of the UK central government policies regarding his devolved territory.

But at the same time, nationalism is the terrain and language of Irish nationalists. Scottish nationalism and the referendum most threatens unionists, who would be thrown into deep existential turmoil – along with the rest of the UK - were Scotland to vote yes in September.

The nationalist dilemma

As for Irish nationalists, they have remained relatively muted about the Scottish referendum despite Gerry Adams' comments - even though you might assume that the possibility of just suddenly dismantling the UK would be a boon to them.

The fact is that with Ireland's economic woes, this would be the worst of all possible times to try to win a referendum for a united Ireland. Ireland lost portions of its own sovereignty during the financial crisis, undermining the argument that unity would allow self-determination for a single Ireland.

As in Iceland, the collapse has led to profound questions about the adequacy of the current political class and pressure for profound change. Apart from the difficulty of persuading a critical mass of liberal Protestants to vote for a project they have not bought into in significant numbers before, one suspects that any all-Ireland referendum campaign might even struggle to keep its nationalist core onside.

Sinn Féin has avoided overt support for a yes vote in Scotland because it knows that the party's divisive associations would be unhelpful to the SNP. But this circumspection has perhaps also suited at home.

At present, therefore, Northern Ireland has more to fear from politics at home than politics in Scotland. The peace process is being undermined by a complicated set of factors, which boil down to uncompleted business from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Dissidents on all sides appear to be gaining capacity to act on the back of the unease.

People in Northern Ireland tend to see the glass as half full when it comes to peace no matter how rosy the future. But recently even US diplomat Richard Haas, having failed to secure agreement over resolving these issues, **recently warned** the US Congress that Northern Ireland stood a real chance of back-sliding into conflict without urgent attention.

These difficulties have little to do with the Scottish referendum, and without serious attention Northern Ireland's peace process may well unravel whatever the Scottish result (although we must continue to hope and pray not).

What Scotland's referendum and Northern Ireland's disintegrating peace process do speak to is a UK tendency to believe its rhetoric that devolution was a policy option that it successfully rolled out across regions before continuing with business as usual.

This has meant that successive UK governments have tended to underestimate the alternative visions and tensions in how devolution was understood by those implementing it at the periphery.

The hope at the centre must be that it emerges from both troubled moments with the union unscathed. The hope at the periphery must be for a new and more creative engagement between centre and periphery on constitutional development, whatever happens in Scotland this September.